

ELIJAH, AND THE SECRET OF HIS POWER

By

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CHAPTER EIGHT

THE CONFLICT ON THE HEIGHTS OF CARMEL

(I Kings 18)

IT is early morning upon Mount Carmel. We are standing on the highest point, looking northward to where Hermon, on the extreme borders of the land, rears its snow-capped head to Heaven. Around us on the left lies the Mediterranean Sea; its deep blue waters flecked here and there by the sails of the Tyrian mariners. Immediately at Carmel's base winds Kishon's ancient brook, once choked by the slaughter of Sisera's host; and beyond it stretches the plain of Esdraelon, the garden of Palestine, but now sere and barren with three years' drought. Away there in the distance is the city of Jezreel, with the royal palace and the idol temple distinctly visible.

From all sides the crowds are making their way toward this spot, which, from the remotest times, has been associated with worship. No work is being done anywhere; the fires are dying out in the smithy and the forge; the instruments of labor hang useless on the walls; and the whole thought of young and old is concentrated on that mighty convocation to which Ahab has summoned them. See how the many thousands of Israel are slowly gathering, and taking up every spot of vantage ground from which a view can be obtained of the proceedings; and prepared for any extreme - from the impure rites of Baal and Astarte, to the re-establishment of their fathers' religion on the dead bodies of the false priests!

The people are nearly gathered, and there is the regular tread of marshaled men - four hundred prophets of Baal, conspicuous with the sun-symbols flashing on their brows; but the prophets of Astarte are absent: the queen, at whose table they ate, has overruled the summons of the king. And now, through the crowd, the litter of the king, borne by stalwart carriers, threads its way, surrounded by the great officers of state.

But our thought turns from the natural panorama, and the sea of upturned faces, and the flashing splendor of the priests, sure of court favor, and insolently defiant. And we fix our thought with intense interest on that one man, of sinewy build and flowing hair, who, with flashing eye and compressed lip, awaits the quiet hush which will presently fall upon that mighty concourse. One man against a nation! See, with what malignant glances his every movement is watched by the priests. No tiger ever watched its victim more fiercely! If they may have their way, he will never touch yonder plain again.

The king alternates between fear and hate; but restrains himself, because he feels that, somehow, the coming of the rain depends on this one man. And through the crowd, if there be sympathizers they are hushed and still. Even Obadiah discreetly keeps out of the way. But do not fear for Elijah - he needs no sympathy! He is consciously standing in the presence of One to whom the nations of men are as grasshoppers. All Heaven is at his back. Legions of angels fill the mountain with horses and chariots of fire. He is only a man of like passions with ourselves, but he is full of faith and spiritual power; he has learned the secret of moving God Himself; he can avail himself of the very resources of Deity, as a slender rod may draw lightning from the cloud.

This very day, by faith - not by any inherent power, but by faith - you shall see him

- Subdue a kingdom;
- Work righteousness;
- Escape the edge of the sword;
- Wax valiant in the fight; and
- Turn to flight armies of the aliens.

Nothing shall be impossible to him. Is it not written that **“All things are possible to him that believeth?”**

He spoke seven times during the course of that memorable day; and his words are the true index of what was passing in his heart.

I. ELIJAH UTTERED A REMONSTRANCE

“Elijah came unto all the people and said, How long halt ye between two opinions? If the Lord be God, follow Him; but if Baal, then follow him.”

To his clear faith, which was almost sight, there was no “if.” He did not doubt for a moment that the Lord was God. But he wanted to show the people the absurdity of their position. Religions so diametrically opposed could not both be right. One of them must be wrong; and as soon as the true one was discovered, the other, shown to be false, must be cast to the winds.

At present their position was illogical and absurd. Their course was like the limp of a man whose legs are uneven; or like the device of a servant employed to serve two masters - doing his best for both, and failing to please either.

His sincere and simple soul had no patience with such egregious folly. No doubt they had drifted into it, as men often do into absurd and wrong positions. We are all liable to that drift of the stream. But the time had come for the nation to be arrested in its attempt to mingle the worship of the Lord and of Baal, and compelled to choose between the two issues that presented themselves. Undoubtedly, the prophet felt that if once his people were compelled to choose between the two, and to say whether the Lord of their fathers, or Baal, should be God, there could be no doubt as to their verdict. The people seemed to have been stunned and ashamed that such alternatives should be presented to their choice; for **“they answered him not a word.”**

Oh for the clear-sightedness of that faith which shall show men the unreasonableness of their position - sweeping away the cobwebs of sophistry with a single movement of the hand; and arraiging them at the bar of their own consciences, silent and condemned. It is needed in our day as much as ever.

Everywhere men are trying to win the smile of the world and the “**well-done**” of Christ. They crowd alike the temples of mammon and of God. They try to be popular in the court of Saul, and to stand well with the exiled David.

II. ELIJAH THREW DOWN A CHALLENGE

“The God that answereth by fire, let Him be God.”

It was a fair proposal; because Baal was the lord of the sun, and the god of those productive natural forces of which heat is the element and sign. The votaries of Baal could not therefore refuse.

And every Israelite could recall many an occasion in the glorious past when the Lord had answered by fire.

- It burnt in the acacia bush, which was its own fuel;
- It shone like a beacon light in the van of the desert march;
- It gleamed on the brow of Sinai;
- It smote the murmuring crowds;
- It fell upon the sacrifices which awaited it on the brazen altar.

It was the emblem of the Lord, and the sign of His acceptance of His people’s service.

When Elijah, therefore, proposed that each side should offer a bullock, and await an answer by fire, he secured the immediate acquiescence of the people. **“All the people answered and said, It is well spoken.”**

That proposal was made in the perfect assurance that God would not fail him.

Had he not spent days in prayer? Had not the Divine plan been revealed to him? Was it to be supposed for a moment that God would push His servant into the front of the battle, and then leave him? Granted that a miracle must be wrought ere the sun set: there was no difficulty about that to a man who lived in the secret place of the Most High. Miracles are only the results of the higher laws of His presence-chamber.

God will never fail the man who trusts Him utterly.

He may keep him waiting till the fourth watch of the morning; but the gray dawn will reveal Him stepping across the billows’ crests to His servant’s help. Be sure that you are on God’s plan; then forward in God’s name! - The very elements shall obey you, and fire shall leap from Heaven at your command.

III. ELIJAH DEALT OUT WITHERING SARCASM

For the first time in their existence, the false priests were unable to insert the secret spark of fire among the fagots that lay upon their altar. They were compelled, therefore, to rely on a direct appeal to their patron deity. And this they did with might and main. Round and round the altar they went in the mystic choric dance, breaking their rank sometimes by an excited leap up and down at the altar which was made; and all the while repeating the monotonous chant, "Baal, hear us! Hear us, Baal!" But there was no voice, nor any that answered.

"Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have mouths, but they speak not; eyes have they, but they see not; they have ears, but they hear not; they that make them are like them, so is everyone that trusteth in them."

Three hours passed thus. Their deity slowly drove his golden car up the steep of Heaven, and ascended his throne in the zenith. It was surely the time of his greatest power, and he must help them then, if ever. But all he did was to bronze to a deeper tint the eager, upturned faces of his priests.

Elijah could ill conceal his delight in their defeat. He knew it would be so. He was so sure that nothing could avert their utter discomfiture, that he could afford to mock them, by suggesting a cause for the indifference of their god:

"Cry aloud, for he is a god; either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth, and must be awaked."

Sarcasm is an invaluable weapon when it is used to expose the ridiculous pretensions of error, and to convince men of the folly and unreasonableness of their ways.

"And they cried aloud; and cut themselves after their manner, with knives and lancets, till their blood gushed out upon them."

Surely their extremity was enough to touch the compassion of any deity, however hard to move! And, since the heavens still continued dumb, did it not prove to the people that their religion was a delusion and a sham?

Thus three more hours passed by, till the hour had come when, in the temple of Jerusalem, the priests of God were accustomed to offer the evening lamb. **"But there was neither voice, nor any to answer, nor any that regarded."** The altar stood cold and smokeless the bullock unconsumed.

IV. ELIJAH ISSUED AN INVITATION

His time had come at last; and his first act was to invite the people nearer. He knew what his faith and prayer had won from God; but he wanted the answer of fire to be beyond dispute. He therefore invited the close scrutiny of the people, as he reared the broken altar of the Lord.

As he sought, with reverent care, those scattered stones, and built them together so that the twelve stood as one - meet symbol of the unity of the ideal Israel in the sight of God - the keen glances of the people in his close proximity could see that there was no inserted torch or secret spark.

Do we not want a few more, who, amid the scatterings of the present day, can still discern the true unity of the Church, the body of Christ? We may never see that unity visibly manifested until we see the Bride, the Lamb's wife, descend out of Heaven from God, having the glory of God. But nevertheless we can enter into God's ideal of it as a spiritual unity, existing unbroken in His thought, and unaffected by the divisions of our times.

V. ELIJAH GAVE A COMMAND

His faith was exuberant. He was so sure of God, that he dared to heap difficulties in his way, knowing that there is no real difficulty for infinite power. The more unlikely the answer was, the more glory would there be to God. Oh, matchless faith! which can laugh at impossibilities, and can even heap them one upon another, to have the pleasure of seeing God vanquish them - as a steam hammer cracks a nut-shell placed under it by the wondering child.

The altar was reared; the wood laid in order; the bullock cut in pieces: but to prevent any possibility of fraud, and to make the coming miracle still more wonderful, Elijah said, "**Fill four barrels with water, and pour it on the sacrifice and on the wood.**" This they did three times, till the wood was drenched, and the water filled the trench, making it impossible for a spark to travel across.

Alas, few of us have faith like this! We are not so sure of God that we dare to pile difficulties in His way. We all try our best to make it easy for Him to help us. Yet what this man had, we too may have, by prayer and fasting.

VI. ELIJAH OFFERED A PRAYER

Such a prayer! It was quiet and assured, confident of an answer. Its chief burden was that God should vindicate Himself that day, in showing Himself to be God indeed, and in turning the people's heart back to Himself.

Whenever we can so lose ourselves in prayer as to forget personal interests, and to plead for the glory of God, we have reached a vantage ground from which we can win anything from Him. Our blessed Lord, in His earthly life, had but one passion - that His Father might be glorified; and now He cannot resist fulfilling the prayer which advances this as its plea: "**Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in My name, that will I do; that the Father may be glorified in the Son.**"

Is it wonderful that "**the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench?**"

It could not have been otherwise!

And let us not think that this is an old-world tale, never to be repeated. The fire still waits for the Promethean faith that can bring it down. If there were the same need, and if any one of us exercised the same faith, we might again see fire descending. Did not the Holy Ghost inaugurate this very age with flames of fire? Our God is a consuming fire; and when once the unity of His people is recognized, and His presence is sought. He will descend, overcoming all obstacles, and converting a drenched and dripping sacrifice into food on which He Himself can feed.

VII. ELIJAH ISSUED AN ORDER FOR EXECUTION

It was a very terrible act; and yet what could he do? The saints of those times knew nothing of our false notions of liberality. Tell Elijah that those men might be sincere, he would find it difficult to believe it; and he would assert that they were none the less dangerous to the best interests of his people.

To let them escape would be to license them as the agents of apostasy.

They must die. And so the order went forth from those stern lips: **“Take the prophets of Baal; let not one of them escape.”** The people were in the mood to obey. Only a moment before they had rent the air with the shout, **“the Lord, He is the God! the Lord, He is the God!”** They see how hideously they had been deceived. And now they close round the cowed and vanquished priests, who see that resistance is in vain, and that their hour is come.

“And they took them.”

Some took one, and some another; each priest was hurried down the mountain-side by the frenzied and determined men who were beginning to see in them the cause of the long-continued drought.

“Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon, and slew them there.”

One after another they fell beneath his sword; whilst the king stood by, a helpless spectator of their doom, and Baal did naught to save them.

And when the last was dead, the prophet knew that rain was not far off. He could almost hear the footfall of the clouds hurrying up toward the land. He knew, what we all need to know, that God Himself can only bless the land or heart which no longer shelters within its borders rivals to Himself. May God clear us of His rivals, and impart to us Elijah's faith, that we may also be strong and do exploits!

~ end of chapter 8 ~

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